

Baird Urges President to Fund Vets Health Care (September 25, 2006)

Washington, D.C. - Congressman Brian Baird and 199 House Democrats sent the following letter to President Bush today urging him to provide the necessary funding for veterans' health care in his FY 2008 budget. The Administration has consistently underfunded veterans' health care in its past six budgets.

Congressman Baird led the effort to restore a \$1 billion Veterans Administration (VA) budget shortfall last year. He has made veterans issues a top priority of his congressional tenure. A former clinical psychologist who worked in VA hospitals, Baird also worked to keep our local VA hospitals open and secure more money for veterans' physical and mental health care services.

September 25, 2006

Honorable George W. Bush

The President

The White House

Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As your administration continues to formulate its FY 2008 budget submission, we write to request that you provide the necessary funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system and related benefits programs. Unfortunately, we believe it is necessary to express our serious concern in this matter due to your administration's record of under-funding the VA by at least \$9 billion over the last 6 years. We are particularly concerned about veterans funding next year and in the future as your budget submission this year reduced veterans' funding by \$10 billion over the next 5 years.

Providing for our military veterans and their families is a continuing cost of war and should be an important component of our national defense policy. Indeed, President George Washington recognized this point, saying, "[t]he willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the Veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation." Mr. President, the time is right for your administration to change course and fully fund the VA, cease efforts to shift the costs of health care onto the backs of veterans, and finally recognize and implement the concept of shared sacrifice with respect to the federal budget.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan along with the aging of our World War II, Korea and Vietnam War veterans have increased demand for VA services. However, year after year you request inadequate funding for veterans' health care. Each year your budget submission includes proposals to increase veterans' co-payments and fees, essentially taxing certain veterans for their health care. Each year your VA budget fails to request what is needed and relies on accounting gimmicks such as management efficiencies and inaccurate health care projections. Such efforts are transparent as the true consequences of your administration's budget flaws are being realized by current and future veterans. Indeed, recently VA officials themselves acknowledged that greater funding was needed to care for our servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from mental health disorders and traumatic brain injuries.

Mr. President, during your tenure, health care waiting lines have increased, appointments and medical procedures delayed, more than 250,000 veterans have been turned away from entering the VA health care system, and disability and education claims backlogs have grown to unreasonable rates. Moreover, Congress has been forced to add billions of dollars in supplemental VA funding due to embarrassing funding shortfalls.

What we request of you and your administration is simple: provide funding in your FY 2008 budget submission to ensure that our servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and the heroes from our previous conflicts receive the care and benefits they have earned and deserve.

Without question, Mr. President, the federal budget is a reflection of national policies and ultimately a reflection of our moral priorities. Please join us in working to provide the necessary resources in the fiscal year 2008 budget to fully fund the VA and to take care of our veterans and their families.

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